

THE BALLAD POETRY OF DANTE

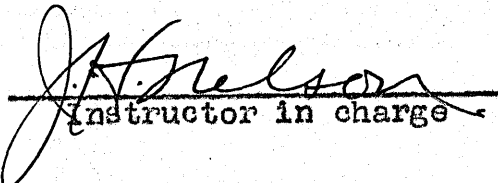
GABRIEL ROSSETTI

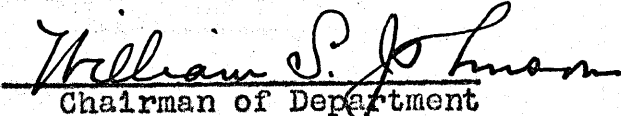
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Chapter I.

INTRODUCTION

I.

In any critical work there is likely to be some misunderstanding, on the part of the reader, as to the meaning of terms. To prevent this, as far as possible, I have deemed it advisable to present early in this thesis an explanation of "popular ballad" and "ballad poetry" and to show how they are related. Through the comparative study of the two types, I have arrived at a definition of the latter which, though wide in its application, has been useful in the classification of an important part of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry.

I do not pretend to give any new information concerning the ballad, but merely to present a short sketch of it, as it has been defined by able critics, to review cursorily the theories of

its origin, and to give a few of its outstanding characteristics. By so doing, I wish to make clearer the handling of the type by Rossetti and to show how, even in his imitation of the popular ballad, he was ever the conscious artist, striving for effect.

What the term "popular ballad" connotes is well expressed by Professor Gummere who calls it "a narrative poem without any known author or any marks of individual authorship such as sentiment and reflection, meant, in the first instance, for singing, and connected, as its name implies, with the communal dance, but submitted to a process of oral tradition among people free from literary influences and fairly homogeneous." ¹ In contrast to this, ballad poetry--which will be defined later in this chapter--is the work of a specific author and is no longer considered as a song or as a part of a group dance. It has passed from the control of what we term "the common people" into the hands of the "literati."

Although the popular ballad was one of

1. Cambridge History of English Literature, II, p. 449.

the earliest and most common forms of poetry, ballad poetry, as a literary type, has been in existence in England for only a little more than a century and a half. Like the so-called popular songs of our own time, the early ballads were long considered as unworthy of preservation; they were recited or sung at the family fireside or at the community gathering, and passed on from one group to another, without any thought of their being of any interest to any one else. It remained for Bishop Percy to discover the literary significance of these ballads, and to collect them in a book which was published in 1765, under the title Reliques of Ancient English Poetry. This collection is not considered to be complete, or the ballads to be in all cases accurately recorded, yet it is valuable because of the interest it awakened in popular literature, and the encouragement it gave to later collectors.

There is not a little dispute as to the origin of the popular ballad, but most students accept the theory that it started like a folk song, and was accompanied by a dance of a dramatic kind. The leader of the dance, which was very likely

to be in circular or other group formation, started to compose a narrative in song. He determined the tune which was taken up by the other dancers, who added new lines to the story or chanted a kind of refrain at regular intervals in the leader's story. Perhaps this refrain gave opportunity for the leader to invent new stanzas for his story; sometimes it even advanced the story by adding a new work or group of words to the original refrain. The song was sung with much emotion and exaggerated dramatic action. There was probably a great deal of hand-clapping and head-shaking. The story usually commemorated some "notable occurrence, famous exploit, some strange tale of passion, or of wonder."² The length of the story was often great, for extra stanzas were likely to be added as the dance advanced.

In earliest stages, before there was any distinction of classes, the stories reflected the lives and minds of the entire people, but after the growth of social and political divisions, the upper class outgrew its interest in this type of story. Ballads then became specifically the property of the uneducated and received the epithet "popular" as a mark of inferior refinement.³

2. Types of Poetry, edited by J. Zeitlin And G.

Rinaker, p. 3.

3. Ibid., p.3.

Although many of these ballads were retained by the people, undoubtedly many more of them perished before they were discovered by anyone inclined to preserve them in print for future generations. There were few ballads in written form before Percy attempted to make his collection, and furthermore, many of the ballads which did exist in manuscript form were generally very carelessly preserved, as is evidenced by an example given by Professor Kittredge:

What the people sang would only be recorded by accident. Thus it is not surprising that we have but a single ballad written down in the thirteenth century. The existence of this one text, the 'Judas', completely popular in metre, in phraseology, and in what we call atmosphere, is a valuable piece of evidence. . . . 'St. Stephen and Herod' is just such another piece as 'Judas' and may be quite as old, yet it did not achieve the perpetuity of pen and ink until about 1450. 'The Maid and the Palmer', which is a popular version of the story of the Samaritan woman in the gospel, belongs to the same class. . . . When Percy discovered this manuscript it was lying under a bureau in the parlor of a country gentleman's house, and the maids were using it to light the fires. ⁴

In view of such carelessness, it is remarkable that we have as many of the popular ballads as we have.

Because of the aesthetic qualities and the excellent structure of some of the old ballads,

4. ~~English and Scottish Popular Ballads~~, edited by ~~Alfred Sargent and G.E. Kittredge~~, (1904), p. xiv.

many students of the subject believe in individual rather than collective authorship. Since the author did not write his composition, it was subjected to the process of oral tradition, and became noticeably different from the original poem, by virtue of this transmission by persons not acquainted with it at first. Some persons maintain that minstrels were the original authors of ballads; that they composed the story and the tune, and accompanied it with harp music. Listeners learned part of the minstrel's song and later sang it without regard for the composer's version, adding parts when they could not recall the original text, and omitting large portions of the song as it was first sung. Professor Kittredge, however, accepts the theory that minstrels were not the originators of the ballad. He bases his proof on two important facts:

It is capable of practically formal proof that for the last two or three centuries the English and Scottish ballads have not, as a general thing, been sung and transmitted by professional minstrels or their representatives. There is no reason whatever for believing that the state of things between 1300 and 1600 was different, in this regard, from that between 1600 and 1900. 5

Another piece of evidence that minstrel authorship did not exist, according to Professor Kittredge, is that there is no "special connection between the professional minstrel and the great mass of popular ballads, but we do find an intimate connection between the minstrels and works of an altogether different order. Ballads are one thing: the medieval *spielmannsdichtung* or minstrel poetry is another. The two categories are recognized as distinct by all literary historians. In fact, they are much more than distinct, they are incommensurable. It is not conceivable that the same order of mind and the same habit of thought should have produced them both." ⁶ Even though minstrels may not have had anything to do with the authorship of the ballads, they were undoubtedly instrumental in spreading them, and in passing them on to posterity.

A third theory as to the origin of the ballad of England is that it was borrowed from France and Denmark. In spite of marked similarities between the early ballads of these countries, I can see no reason for believing that the English did not have ballads of their own as early as did the others. We have already mentioned the fact that

6. Ibid., p. xxiii.

many ballads actually existed long before they were available in written form, which may account for the belief that, because in England the ballads did not appear early, they were borrowed. Similarities in the ballads of the three countries may easily be accounted for. Not only the Danes, but also the French were in direct contact with the English people by reason of their invasions. In addition to this fact we must remember that the minstrels often traveled far, and that they may easily have mingled different ballads together, forming new ones.

Of the three theories concerning the origin of the ballad, the most likely is the first, and it is this one which is generally adopted.

Popular ballads may be classified in various ways. Perhaps the most useful, as well as most convenient manner of classification is according to theme. In Types of Poetry, edited by Jacob Zeitlin and Clara Rinaker, the following grouping is made: ballads of legendary and historical exploits, of which Chevy Chase and any of the Robin Hood ballads are noteworthy examples; ballads

of folk-lore and superstition, such as The Wife of Usher's Well and The Daemon Lover; ballads of romance, including such poems as The Maid Freed from the Gallows; and ballads of tragic passion, like Edward, Fair Margaret and Sweet William, and Bonny Barbara Allan.

The ballads of the latter group are generally concerned with the unhappy side of passionate love. Often one of the lovers is unfaithful, parents or brothers of the bride object to the marriage, a non-human personage appears to alienate the affections of one of the lovers, or a tragic death causes unhappiness or despair. The stealing of a bride is a common subject, as is also betrayal. Usually the love affair ends something like that of Faire Margaret and Sweet William:

Lady Margaret died on the overnight,
Sweet William died on the morrow;
Lady Margaret died for pure, pure love,
Sweet William died for sorrow.⁷

Seldom do we find two happy lovers.

The popular ballads are not all tragic, however, and we find that in the historical or legendary ballads, especially, there is often a

7. English and Scottish Popular Ballads, p. 159.

note of lightness and even an occasional flash of humor. In Robin Hood and the Bishop of Hereford, for example, when the bishop learns that he is in the hands of the well known Robin, the situation is humorous:

'O pardon, O pardon,' said the Bishop,
 'O pardon, I thee pray!
 For if I had known it had been you,
 I'd have gone some other way.' 8

There is a tendency for the humor of the ballads to become too coarse, especially in those belonging to the lower classes of society. Fortunately, perhaps, a large number of such ballads have not survived.

Structurally, the popular ballad is generally very simple. The rhythmic form is the "four accent couplet known in popular song. With the refrain this couplet formed a quatrain; in later and longer ballads, as also in some of the short "situation" ballads, the refrain is replaced by a second and fourth line, constituents of the regular stanza, which may be an actual substitution for the refrain, or else simply the three accent portion of the old septinarius." 9

8. English and Scottish Ballads, p. 362

9. Cambridge History of English Literature, II, p.450

A stanza typical of the popular ballad
is this one from A True Tale of Robin Hood.

It is a tale of Robin Hood,
Which I to you will tell,
Which being rightly understood,
I know will please you well. 10

Not all stanzas follow this conventional form,
however, and we note many variations of it. Often
the rhyme is faulty, the lines are of unequal length,
and the number of lines in a stanza varies, even
within a single poem. In the well known ballad of
Sir Cauline are several stanzas like this one:

Faire Christabelle, that ladye bright,
Was had forthe of the towre;
But ever she droopeth in her minde,
As nipt by an ungentle winde
Dothe some faire lillie flowre. 11

We cannot safely make assertions about the
irregularities of form of the popular ballad, be-
cause oral tradition is often responsible for the
defects which we find in the printed versions.

If we accept the communal origin of the new type
we can readily believe that the ballads were usually
quite rhythmical, and that the conventional four
line stanza, with its singing movement, was almost

10. English and Scottish Popular Ballads, p. 341

LL. Percy, Bishop, Reliques of Ancient English Poetry,

invariably, possibly always, the original form.

It may be well, here, to say a word about the refrain, incremental repetition, and the use of dialogue in the popular ballads. There are several different types of refrain. Concerning this, Mr. T.F.Henderson says:

Often the refrain is apposite to the tenor of the ballad, and sometimes it condenses its sentiment, its wild passion or its pathos with peculiar power. When the refrain is of this variety, the ballad itself is almost invariably of a superior kind, or originally has been so; but the meaningless refrain, or the refrain introduced malapropos may be as old as the other. 12

There are many examples of the different types of refrain, in the collections of popular ballads, but I shall discuss them in a later chapter of this work, so that they need not be cited here.

"Incremental repetition", so named by Professor Gummere, is very much like a refrain, except that it is more valuable in advancing the story. Sometimes it consists in simple verbal repetition, as is the case in "This is the House that Jack Built," and again it consists in a more

elaborate form. This repetition is especially effective, according to Professor Sidgwick, "when used to drop the curtain on the ballad."¹³ Many of the best ballads show this method in the process of construction.

The use of dialogue gives to the ballad a particularly dramatic effect, and is found in a very great number of the popular ballads. It generally takes the form of question and answer, and the final answer frequently sums up the whole situation which is probably tragic. Edward, Edward is an outstanding example of the use of dialogue. This composition is well known for its dramatic intensity and its strong tragic element.

The diction used in popular ballads is remarkably simple and natural. "The ballad", as Mr. Gummere says, "shuns metaphor and all striving for figurative effect. It is simple in that there is no play of fancy in epithet, phrase or word, or in the arrangement of words and phrases." ¹⁴

13. The Ballad, p.9

14. The Cambridge History of English Literature, II, p. 461

There are a great many stock expressions found in the old ballads but they do not take from the effectiveness of the work. Like the refrain, they are so much a part of the ballad machinery that we scarcely think of the ballad without them.

II.

This swift survey of the popular ballad is very inadequate, but it may serve as a brief introduction to the literary ballad, which has developed out of it, but which is now, in many respects, independent. The chief difference between the two types is that the literary one takes shape under the pen of a conscious artist, who aims to transmit his work to other persons, to have it become a definite part of literature, while, as has been mentioned before, the authorship of the popular ballad is unknown, and it has no marks of individuality that can help us to assign

it to any certain poet.

The writer of the literary ballad may use, and generally does use, the same themes as those in the old ballad, but he often elaborates on them, or gives them a studied simplicity unlike the naive simplicity of the older type. There is a refinement of human passion, subtlety of characterization, structural perfection, and a purity of expression that we do not often find in the popular ballad. The artist studies his diction and phraseology; he experiments with verse forms, and ever consciously strives for certain definite effects. The literary ballad is certainly the work of an artist, and not a production of the common people.

Some of the externals of the popular ballad have been used effectively by the balladists of later times. The refrain, incremental repetition, dialogue, and often the conventional metrical structure of the old type have been successfully employed by many of the artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in fact, some of the best narrative poems of the period are in part

imitations of the popular ballads.

Important among these are, unquestionably, several of the well known pieces of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. As to which of his poems should be grouped under the ballad heading, however, there is so much difference of opinion that I have thought it necessary to pay much attention to classification and definition. The term ballad poetry, then, as used in this study, will apply to an impersonal narrative poem concerned with love or a historical event. The story is woven about a single episode in the lives of the characters, and is dramatic in tone. The verse form may vary, but usually it is simple. A refrain or some similar device may be employed to add to the effectiveness of the poem, but for the most part the author is not bound by any conventional usages.

In view of this definition, I have classified as Ballads based on historical events, The White Ship and The King's Tragedy; and as ballads in which the theme is love, Sister Helen, Rose Mary, Troy Town, Eden Bower, Stratton Water, The Bride's Prelude, The Staff and Scrip, and

The Blessed Damsel, which are, in my estimation, the most characteristic of Rossetti's ballads, and the most interesting of his poems as a whole. Many persons may object to my including The Bride's Prelude and The Blessed Damsel in the classification with the others, but in spite of the lyrical qualities of the poems, they have all the characteristics of the literary ballad just listed.

Chapter II.

FACTS IN ROSSETTI'S LIFE THAT INFLUENCED HIM IN WRITING BALLAD POETRY

It is not surprising that Dante Gabriel Rossetti was an author of ballad poetry. Rather, we wonder that, interested as he was in it, he wrote relatively so few ballads. It is always difficult, as well as somewhat unsatisfactory, to attempt to trace the influences which lead a man to write one type of poetry rather than another, but there are facts in Rossetti's life, traits in his character, and certain dominant tendencies in his work as an artist that seem to have had some bearing, direct or indirect, upon his writing of ballad poetry. First, a hasty review of the facts

in his life will throw some light upon especially the early influences of environment upon his work. Perhaps Rossetti would have written ballads, even if his home and parentage had been different from what they were, but there is every reason to think that his surroundings had much to do with his choice of material for writing.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was born in London, on May 12, 1828, of Italian parents. His father, Gabriele Rossetti, was an exile from the South of Italy, who had fallen into disfavor because of his revolutionary ideas, too freely expressed in political treatises, patriotic songs, and poems. Although nominally a Roman Catholic, he was opposed to Papal authority, and had abandoned the practice of his religious duties. He was a freethinker, highly intellectual, and a writer of no little note. Dante Gabriel's mother was a member of the Polodori family, a family of considerable prominence in Italy and later in England, highly cultured, refined, and a devout member of the Church of England. Her children were ever intensely devoted to her, at the same time that they held their

father somewhat in awe.

The Rossetti home was one in which there was early an opportunity for enjoying literature and all that goes with it. The four children of whom the eldest was but a little more than four years older than the youngest, early in life showed a liking for reading. The choice of reading matter had much to do with Dante Gabriel's appreciation of the ballad. He read, among much else, the ballads of Sir Walter Scott, a number of the old popular ballads which Percy had collected, and both prose and poetry in which ballad material, if not ballad methods, was contained. Among these latter were The Arabian Nights, Keightley's Fairy Mythology, Monk Lewis's Tales of Wonder and Legends of Terror, and Pierce Egan's romance, Robin Hood.

The Rossetti home was peculiarly Italian in atmosphere, and this fact probably had much to do with the development of Dante Gabriel's imagination. He is described by all his biographers as being strongly Italianate in disposition and temperament. Yet, considering politics and literature,

there were two ways in which the Italian spirit of the household had the opposite effect from that which one might reasonably expect it to have had. Mr. A.C.Benson, in his excellent biography of Rossetti, describes the home conditions and their partial effect upon Dante Gabriel in this way:

The household had few English acquaintances, but Mr. W.M.Rossetti says that "it seems hardly an exaggeration to say that every Italian staying in or passing through London, of a liberal mode of political opinion, sought out my father, to make or renew acquaintance with him . . . Italian patriots, artists, literary men, musicians, venders of plaster-casts, dancing masters, ecclesiastica of every kind congregated there." . . . The children spoke Italian in the house and listened to perpetual declamatory political table talk, idealistic aspirations, recitations of poetry, and reminiscences of Italy.

It is interesting to note that this seems to have developed in D.G.Rossetti an extreme hatred of politics . . . For political ideals and principles he seems to have had a faint sympathy, but for practical politics he had what can only be called an aversion, almost amounting to detestation." 15

This aversion may have been a very fortunate one for it certainly kept Rossetti from any political work; and one who had a father so

deeply interested in political writings and discussions might easily have followed in the parent's footsteps.

Dante Gabriel's father was an ardent student of Dante, and as Benson says:

He was fond of abstruse mystical speculations on the subject of the poems . . . Nothing that Dante wrote was allowed to be capable of simply and natural interpretation; every passage and every word was an elaborate vehicle for the concealment of some mystical speculation or political idea, and the highest praise for a book, in Gabriele Rossetti's mouth, was that it was a "libro sommamente mistico".

The result on the children was that though they viewed their father's studies with respect, the books which he loved were understood not to "do to read" . . . Speaking generally, the studies of their father may be said to have thrown the children, by a species of reaction, rather decidedly into the study of English literature. They read poetry, tales, and wholesome old books, and began very early to try their hand at writing. 16

In later years Dante Gabriel re-discovered Dante, and became an enthusiastic student of this great poet's works. He not only translated some of Dante's compositions, but also used them as themes for many of his paintings. Rossetti's

poetry might possibly have had a different tone had his early reading been directed and influenced by the preferences of his father. He might never have been so intensely interested in the old ballads as he was, and on the whole, his early reading was more that of the normal boy than it might otherwise have been.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's schooling is given but brief treatment by his biographers, and brief treatment will suffice for this study. It is enough to say that most of his education was received at King's College School, where he attended from 1837--1842. He made few friends and was probably not an exceptional student. He showed, however, an aptitude for languages, and is said to have learned "Latin and French well, German fairly, and Greek but little. " 17

When he was about twelve years old, Rossetti wrote his first ballad, Sir Hugh the Heron, which was certainly not notable except as indicating his early leaning toward literature. In later years Rossetti dreaded to hear this poem mentioned, because he considered it as a most

inferior piece of work. It showed, however, that early in his career he was attracted to the ballad subject-matter and style. The poem does not exist today unless it is in a private collection of old manuscripts.

Sometime about his fifteenth year, Rossetti translated, and quite creditably, it is believed, Bürger's Lenore. This old ballad, according to Beers, "was set as a school copy for every young romanticist in turn to try his 'prentice hand upon." 18

Whether or not this translation had a direct influence on Rossetti's next work one cannot say with certainty, but since he wrote another ballad soon after this, it is quite possible that the translation did direct him to some extent. The new ballad, William and Marie, was a shorter poem than Sir Hugh the Heron, and was written, according to William Rossetti, "in a style which is compounded of Walter Scott and the old Scottish ballads; it may also present some trace of Bürger's Lenore." 19 This poem was, if anything, inferior to his earlier ballad, and his brother stated that the

18. Beers, H. , Romanticism of the 19th century, p. 297

19. Rossetti, W.M., Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Letters and a Memoir, vol. I, p. 85.

editor to whom Dante Gabriel had sent it had the good sense not to accept it. The subject matter was similar to that in Sir Hugh the Heron. It was the story of a wicked knight who was killed by a flash of lightning after he had slain a virtuous knight and had thrown the latter's lady-love into a moat.

Even at this early time, Rossetti showed an inclination toward everything savoring of chivalry and everything that was medieval. His art work—for Rossetti was a painter as well as a poet—was likewise influenced by this inclination, and at this period his notebook contained drawings bearing such titles as "A Romance of the Fourteenth Century," "The Genius about to Kill the Princess of the Isle of Ebony," and "Retribution, Sir Guy de Linton." As is quite evident, the drawings were of knights and ladies—drawings that might easily suggest ballad poetry.

About this time Dante Rossetti began to think seriously of studying painting, and began to look around for an academy of art. The first school chosen was known as "Sass's," which was managed by Mr. F.S.Cary, a painter of no very great ability. Rossetti remained there for about four years, after which time he entered the Antique School of the Royal

Academy. Here he met Ford Madox Brown, "and recognized a new spirit at work, a spirit of originality and fidelity, of revolt against stereoscoped traditions." 20 This had considerable influence on his work, especially on his painting.

As far as this study is concerned, the chief interest in the career of Rossetti at the Royal Academy, lies in the effect which it was to have on his poetic work. With his growing enthusiasm in painting, his enthusiasm for all things medieval also increased. "He lived and thought in the Middle Ages." 21 The literature which he most enjoyed was the literature that dealt with this period. In "prose he had a taste for the legendary, the strange, the supernatural, combined with a great relish for humorous writing of any time In 1847 he discovered Browning, and everything else sank into the background; he revelled in the passion, the dramatic perception, the medievalism of Browning." 22

20; Benson, Rossetti, p. 11.

21. Hearn, Lafcadio, Studies in Rossetti, p.1.

22. Benson, A.C., Rossetti, p. 12.

The interest in things medieval probably had as much as anything else to do with the organization, in 1848, of the celebrated Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, of which Rossetti was one of the most enthusiastic members. This society, although begun in the interest of painting, had certain not unworthy literary results. The basic feature of the Pre-Raphaelite movement was unconventionality. The members of the brotherhood ²³ proposed to turn to artists of the age before that of Raphael for their inspiration. The artists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were not to be considered models, but the Pre-Raphaelites felt that, like them, they would develop painting on their own initiative and their own principles, not being bound, as they believed other English artists of the nineteenth century were, by the old conventional principles of Raphael and others of his age. There is really no reason here for going into all the doctrines of the P.R.B., as they called themselves, for we are not primarily concerned with these principles except as they were shown in literature. Before the Brotherhood was very firmly

23. The persons belonging to this Brotherhood were Wm. Holman Hunt and John Everret Millais, both painters; Thos. Woolver, a sculptor and poet; Frederick Stephens, James Collinson, and Wm. and Dante G. Rossetti.

established, the members decided to include the study of literature as well as of painting in their plan, and elected W.M. Rossetti, a brother of Dante Gabriel, to uphold their principles in that phase of the work.

For the purpose of presenting their ideals and principles to the people, the Pre-Raphaelites decided to publish a small periodical, which they named The Germ. Only four numbers of the magazine were ever issued, for it was not a financial success, and the Brotherhood could not afford to keep it in existence. The Germ itself is not an attractive magazine, but it contains some really excellent work which is quite characteristic of the Pre-Raphaelites. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Blessed Damozel was one of the finest poems published in the periodical, and indeed it was not long before the author was doing all that he could to help his brother keep The Germ alive. This interest in the magazine was largely responsible for his enthusiasm in writing, at this time. Sister Helen and The Bride's Prelude were among the poems which he wrote or rewrote. They are both of the ballad type, and indicate that Rossetti had not

been discouraged by his early attempts in that field. It was a source of regret to Rossetti, the elder, that his son seemed, in this period, to be neglecting his painting for writing, and he remonstrated with him, with the result that Dante Gabriel resumed the painting.

In seeking for subjects for his pictures, Rossetti, as in his early days, turned to the Middle Ages. The Arthurian legends held a peculiar attraction for him, and some of the best of his pictures had as subjects the knights and ladies of the famous legends. It is little wonder that when he again turned to poetry he had a store of material that was especially suited to the ballad which he had always loved. It is true that there is no ballad of his dealing entirely with the Arthurian legends, but it is equally true that there is in nearly every one of his ballad poems an air of medievalism and a background against which there might well have been Arthurian knights and ladies.

It was sometime in the year of 1850 that Rossetti met a very beautiful girl, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, with whom he soon fell violently in love, and to whom, in 1851, he became engaged.

Miss Siddal, who was referred to as "Lizzie," or "Guggums," in Rossetti's letters, was in very poor health, and partly because of this, and partly because Rossetti was not financially able at this time to set up housekeeping, their engagement lasted until 1860, when they finally married.

Rossetti's wife was a talented person, and was interested in both painting and writing. Although she was far less capable than her husband in both kinds of work, she was undoubtedly a help and an inspiration to him. Probably more than anyone else she helped to keep him interested in his work. In view of our study of his ballad poetry, a pertinent excerpt from one of his letters belonging to the period of his engagement may be quoted:

I think I told you that she (Lizzie) and I are going to illustrate the old Scottish Ballads which Allingham is editing for Rutledge. 24

This letter which was dated 1854 was written to Ford Madox Brown who a little later, records in his diary, an event which has something to do with

24. Rossetti, W.M., Ruskin: Rossetti: Pre-Raphaelitism, p.7.

the same subject, that is, Rossetti's interest in Ballads:

Up at nine. Sat talking to Gabriel about poetry until two in the morning. He read me an imitation of an old Scottish ballad (Stratton Water) which is extremely beautiful, with critiques of it by Allingham. 28

During the period of his engagement and the two short years of his married life, Rossetti continued quite diligently at both his painting and poetic work, but with the tragic death of Lizzie, caused by an overdose of laudanum, he seemed to lose interest in everything. The well known story of his placing the manuscripts which contained all of his poetic work, up to this time, in Lizzie's coffin shows that he then thought that his career as a poet was to be forever sacrificed. Much that is best in his work would indeed have been sacrificed had not solicitous friends prevailed upon him, seven years later, to recover the manuscripts and put them into shape so that the poems might be published.

Rossetti did not, as is sometimes thought, become a solitary, given to morbid brooding, after

his wife's death, nor did he abandon entirely his work. For several years his poetic production was of a small amount, and indeed there is no record of any poems between the years 1862 and 1865, but his painting occupied much of his time. Soon after his wife's death he had moved to a house at Cheyne Walk, and there, in company with A.C. Swinburne and George Meredith, he continued living in much the same manner as before. He had, no doubt, moments of great sadness and gloom, but he was not wrapped in melancholy, as some persons like to believe he was. Neither Swinburne nor Meredith remained long at Cheyne Walk, and within a few years we find Rossetti alone, happy, or at least, reasonably so, in living as he wished to, busy at his art work, and able, when he desired to do so, to entertain his small circle of friends.

During these years Rossetti began to dabble in spiritualism. He seemed to be obsessed with the desire to find some means of communicating with his dead wife, and turned eagerly toward spiritualism with all its strange workings:

Whether Rossetti had any real belief in spiritualism, or whether he wanted to persuade himself that he had, I can hardly say. He was of a highly imaginative nature, and

everything that appertained to the mystic had a strange fascination for him. In spiritualism he took an interest for some time; he went to all the private seances to which he happened to be invited, and now and again would give me an account of them . . . the interest displayed by Rossetti towards everything bearing on the occult gave an insight to his nature, and however inconsequential these incidents may appear, they show how largely both his poetry and his painting were influenced by the bent of his mind in that direction, and his yearning for the unseen. 26

Rossetti's ballads especially show his interest in this sort of thing. There is an air of mystery about some of them, and a dwelling upon unseen forces that strongly suggests this attempted communication with other-world spirits. Rose Mary is an outstanding example of this.

One can scarcely say with truth that Rossetti was suddenly interested in spiritualism, for there had been since his youthful days, a strong tendency in him toward all that savored of it. William Rossetti testifies that "any writing about devils, spectres, or the supernatural generally--had always a strange fascination for him." 27

26. Dunn, H.T., Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his Circle, pp. 55--62.

27. Beers, H., Romanticism of the Nineteenth Century, p. 300

In another connection, Wm. Rossetti says of this love in Dante Gabriel for the unearthly:

As a freethinker, he [the father of the boys] was naturally exempt from popular superstitions--did not believe in ghosts, second sight, etc.; and the same statement holds good for our mother. In this respect Dante Gabriel, as soon as his mind was a little formed, differed from his parents; being quite willing to entertain, in any given case, the question whether a ghost or demon had made his appearance or not, and having indeed a decided bias towards suspecting that he had. 28

Much has been written about this tendency of Rossetti; and familiarity with his poems corroborates the biographers' statements. Sister Helen might easily lead one to believe that the poet was a student of demonology and witchcraft. However that may be, Rossetti knew enough and was sufficiently interested in the subject to make it an element of great strength in his ballads.

The last ten or twelve years of Rossetti's life were marked by a great deal of worry and unhappiness. In 1870, or thereabouts, he began the use of chloral, a drug which was said to be excellent as a relief for insomnia. For a long time Rossetti

had been a victim of the most torturing insomnia, and being naturally of a slightly impatient disposition, he found this sleeplessness almost unbearable. The friend who recommended the use of the drug as a remedy was honestly unaware of the harmful effects of it, and truly ignorant of the results which could attend its use. Without any intention of so doing, Rossetti became before long an addict to the chloral, and it was probably owing to this undesirable habit that his health soon became somewhat impaired, and that he became generally quite unhappy. He had not sufficient moral strength to break the bonds which united him to the miserable habit, and had it not been that he was blessed with devoted relatives and friends, there is no telling what might have become of him.

At one time during this period, Rossetti was morbidly intent upon suicide, and in fact, made a serious attempt to take his own life by swallowing laudanum. It is rather unusual that there seemed to be no intellectual weakening of Rossetti then, and that some of the best of his work, both in poetry and painting, belongs to this period. It is interesting that two of his best ballads were written

during the time when he was almost ready to give up all hope. These ballads, The King's Tragedy and The White Ship, were written as a challenge. The story is told thus by T. Hall Caine. The friend referred to is evidently Mr. Theodore Watts:

The friend went on to induce Rossetti to write a ballad; and this purpose he finally achieved by challenging the poet's ability to compose in the simple, direct, and emphatic style which is the style of the ballad proper, as distinguished from the elaborate, ornate, and condensed diction which he had hitherto worked in (it would be better to say "which he had generally hitherto worked in," for there were instances to the contrary--such as Stratton Water). Put upon his mettle, the outcome was that he wrote The White Ship and afterwards The King's Tragedy. 29

Rossetti's strength was declining, however, and this work was a great strain on him. He said to Hall Caine, "It was as though my own life ebbed out with it." 30 Indeed there were few years remaining to Rossetti after this. Already he had been troubled with a mental disorder which made him think that everyone was leagued with his enemies against him. At times he quarreled with his best friends, who were, as always, doing

29. Rossetti, W.M. D.G. Rossetti: Letters and a Memoir, p. 368

30. Ibid., p. 369

all in their power to bring him comfort and happiness. A change of surroundings was suggested, and immediately several of his friends accompanied him to a country place in Cumberland. There he found more mental delusions awaiting him, and it was a matter of but a few weeks until he was back at Cheyne Walk.

In December of 1881, Rossetti had a partial paralytic stroke, and although he recovered almost entirely from this, he was ailing in health until his death on April 10, 1882, at Birchington, whither he had gone a few months before this time in the hope of being benefited by the sea breezes.

One of the last poems which was written by Rossetti was a ballad, Jan Van Hunks. It was written in March, a few weeks before his death. Of this ballad his brother writes:

I have always considered that his taking up on his deathbed that extremely grim and uncanny though partly bantering theme of Jan Van Hunks--a fatal smoking-duel with the devil, who trundles soul and body off to hell--furnished a strong attestation of the resolute spirit in which my brother contemplated his own end, rapidly approaching and (by himself still more than by any others) clearly foreseen; for a man who is in a panic as to his own prospects in any future world would be apt to drop any such subject like a hot coal. He enjoyed immensely writing the ballad, so Miss Caine says, and laughed with us as he read it

bit by bit every night." At some other times also, according to this lady, he was in high spirits; and on one occasion he told her some tales from The Arabian Nights. ³¹

To the very last, we see, Rossetti retained his early liking for the ballad and the material which served as suitable subject matter for it. He had intimated at one time that he intended to write a ballad about Joan of Arc and another about Abraham Lincoln. In the latter he had intended to bring in something of the story of John Brown, but as far as is known, he never attempted either of these subjects.

In this review of Rossetti's life emphasis has been placed upon the incidents that led him to the choice of the ballad as a medium for poetic inspiration. Incidentally, some of the characteristics of the man have been pointed out, characteristics such as his love for reading, especially ballads and old romantic tales, his tendency toward all that savored of the supernatural and the unusual, his love for all that was of the Middle Ages, and his highly developed powers of imagination. There remain but few other traits

31. Rossetti, W.M. D.G. Rossetti, Letters and a Memoir, p. 392.

to be discussed in connection with his work in the field of ballad poetry.

Rossetti, from early childhood, had a deep appreciation of dramatic situations, and took some interest in acting, with his brother and sisters, scenes from the plays which they had read. A young schoolmaster once came to the Rossetti home on business and was greeted by the sight of the four children busily engaged in a kind of dramatic representation of a scene from one of Sir Walter Scott's books. In this sort of play it is probably that Dante Gabriel was the leader. There are instances of his trying to reproduce scenes from several of Shakespeare's plays, especially from Hamlet and Othello, for which he seems to have had a particular liking. To one with an appreciation of drama, the ballad was certain to have an appeal. It may be mentioned in passing that Rossetti's own ballads are peculiarly dramatic generally. Sister Helen is especially noted for its dramatic intensity.

Rossetti's being of an Italianate rather than of an English disposition may have had much influence on his choice of subject matter for his poems. He was wholly uninspired by any of the

political movements, or scientific discoveries of his day. He seemed to be entirely concerned with the subject of human relationships. In his sonnets as well as in his ballads one finds examples of this. For an impersonal presentation of these human relations, the ballad was particularly well suited. He is much concerned with the tragedy of life, and conventional ballad themes, as has been mentioned before, are based largely on this very thing. Is it any wonder, then, that this poet, who saw tragedy in broken vows, in human passions, should express himself in the ballad?

Rossetti's theory of poetry also had something to do with the choice of the ballad. He believed not only that poetic diction should be simple and direct, but also that it should be pictorial. Furthermore, "emphasis and condensation," it is said, "were the characteristics of his muse." ³² Surely, one can find no form of poetry that is more capable of carrying these principles into execution than is the ballad. "I hate long poems," he often declared, and of Sidney Dobell he once impatiently enunciated, 'What a pity it is

32. Benson, A.C., Rossetti, p. 82.

that he insists on being generally so long-winded!" 33
 Rossetti himself did not always follow his own principles, as we shall see when we come to a critical analysis of his ballads, but these same principles may possibly have had much to do with his writing of ballads rather than longer poems.

Furhermore, a poet who had such desultory habits of working as Rossetti had would be inclined toward a form of poetry which would demand less time for completion than would another type. Both his choice of the sonnet as well as that of the ballad may have been in part determined by this factor. Perhaps we are straining a point to lay so much stress on such matters as these, but at any rate the fact remains that Dante Gabriel Rossetti was not attracted to long poems like the epic, and in spite of his dramatic tendencies, he made but one feeble attempt, very early in life, at the writing of a play. With material such as he collected, either of these other forms of expression would have been effective, yet he chose the ballad instead.

Moreover, Rossetti's work as a painter had not a little effect upon the determining of his

33. Benson, A.C., Rossetti, p. 82.

poetry. On several occasions, the pictures which he painted seemed to suggest subject matter for ballads. Undoubtedly some of these suggestions were not heeded by the poet, but on the other hand, several of his most attractive ballads appear to have come from just such suggestions. In about 1864, for example, he painted the picture Lady Lilith, and in 1869 he wrote the ballad, Eden Bower, which was seemingly inspired, to a certain extent, by the picture of the woman, or spirit, Lilith.

There seems to be very good reason to think that Rossetti's principle of painting carried over into his poetic work. In his painting we see the same leaning toward all that has any medievalism connected with it, and we see also a tendency to portray, especially in some of the early paintings, a whole dramatic situation. In his paintings, also, is found a tendency to crowd into a small space a narrative theme, if we may so speak.

As has been brought to the reader's attention before, Rossetti found subjects for his pictorial art, as well as for his poetry, in the books which he had read during his early years, and since he was extremely capable of fitting these

subjects into his paintings, he might have said of painting from the stories, as he did of writing ballads from them, "There lies your line." 34

34. Benson, A.C., Rossetti, p. 76.

Chapter III.

SUBJECT MATTER AND THEMES OF ROSSETTI'S BALLAD POETRY

To treat of Rossetti's choice of subject matter and themes for his ballads, the classification which was made in the closing paragraphs of the introductory chapter will be again used. The group in which the love-theme is predominant will be considered first, and after that the poems which are based on historical events. In the first group are included Sister Helen, Rose Mary, Stratton Water, The Bride's Prelude, The Staff and Scrip, The Blessed Damozel, Troy Town, and Eden Bower. To the second group belong The White Ship and The King's Tragedy.

Sister Helen is concerned with the hatred of a young girl who has found her lover false. In her intense feeling against him, she resorts to a

practice of witchcraft to obtain revenge for his unfaithfulness to her. The poem opens upon the scene in which Sister Helen is absorbed in her work. It is an unusual thing which she is doing, and her little brother asks:

"Why did you melt your waven man,
Sister Helen?" 35

This innocent child does not understand. He sees the waxen image, but, childlike, he sees only the rapid disappearance of a small figure, which probably to him is attractive only because it is like a toy. He cannot realize that this melting of the image was an old practice of witches who desired to obtain revenge. With the melting of the wax, the person whom the image represented grew weaker and died. We have many instances of the use of this method of taking someone's life. In Professor Summer's Geography of Witchcraft, we find a very interesting account of it:

Wax figures were employed in the liturgy of the god, Amen-Ra, whose temple was at Thebes. One part of the daily worship consisted in acts which were supposed to free the Sun, deified under the form of Ra,

35. Rossetti, D.G., Poetical Works, edited with notes by Wm. Rossetti, (1910), p. 134.

from a hideous human dragon named Apep, storm clouds and darkness. By the time of the Ptolemies there had been compiled a book called The Book of Overthrowing Apep. The litanies and prayers of Ra are given, the words of power, and then the rubric runs: "If thou wouldst destroy Apep, thou shalt say this chapter over a figure of Apep, which hath been drawn in green colour upon a sheet of new papyrus, and over a wax figure of Apep upon which his name hath been cut and inlaid with green colour; and thou shalt lay them upon the fire so that it may consume the enemy of Ra." 36

This charm was to be repeated as many times as necessary to obtain the final results. From ancient Egypt the magic use of wax figures passed to Greece, thence to Rome, and from there to Western Europe. About the end of the seventh century the life of King Duffus of Scotland was attempted in this way. Witches of North Berwick (about 1597) made a similar figure of James I. There are many other examples of the use of the image, and it is little wonder that Rossetti, interested as he had always been in the study of witchcraft, should make use of such a motif for his ballad.

From the beginning of Sister Helen, we watch with intense horror the melting of the image

of her former lover. The relatives of the lover come to plead with Sister Helen to cease her work, but as they appear, Sister Helen only rejoices that her revenge is being so keenly felt by all the members of the family, and will not heed their cries. Even when the bride of the false lover appears, Helen is absolutely unrelenting. She has apparently no sympathy for the lady, and thinks only of her own bitter betrayal and her desire to accomplish what she has begun.

The story is all the more terrible in its effect because Helen realizes that her action will be the cause of her eternal damnation; and yet she perseveres in it. When at last the waxen image has been completely melted, and the false lover, has, as a consequence, died, Sister Helen answers her little brother's question,

"Ah! what white thing at the door has
crossed? 37

by saying,

"A soul that's lost as mine is lost,
Little Brother!" 38

37. Poetical Works, p. 148

38. Poetical Works, p. 148

There could be nothing much more terrible than that last line with its note of intense dramatic tragedy. Rossetti has in the poem given us a theme that is genuinely characteristic of his choice, and he has handled it in a thoroughly effective manner.

Rose Mary is also very characteristic of Rossetti. It is the story of a girl who, like Sister Helen, has been betrayed by her lover. The theme is handled in a quite different way from the theme of Sister Helen. We are not impressed so strongly with the unfaithfulness of the lover as we are with the fact that Rose Mary is not the pure girl that her mother thinks her to be. The chief interest in the theme is that Rossetti has woven it about an old idea of divination. Rose Mary and her mother are awaiting the arrival of Rose Mary's lover, Sir James of Haronhay. The mother has heard that the knight's life is in danger, but she does not know the name of the foe, or the time or place of what is to occur.

The mother is in possession of a magic stone in which only a pure person may read the

future. She calls Rose Mary to look into the stone to find out about the future of Sir James, so that he may be warned of his danger before it is too late. Rose Mary reads what the beryl-stone has to say, but because she is really not pure, the message is an incorrect one. The evil spirits have deceived the girl. Before the three days have elapsed when Sir James was to have arrived, Rose Mary's mother discovers that the divination has been incorrect, and realizes her daughter's true character. Sir James has fallen into the hands of his enemies, and is killed. With his death Rose Mary loses all hope of happiness and is overcome by grief. Leaving the priest to comfort her daughter, Rose Mary's mother goes into the room where the body of Sir James lies. She is in a forgiving mood when she sees him lying there dead, but suddenly she spies in his torn vest a packet covered with blood. At first she thinks that it is a betrothal gift of her daughter, but when she opens it she finds that it contains a message from another girl. This is the first indication of the knight's unfaithfulness to Rose Mary, and at once the mother's feeling of

forgiveness turns into the bitterest hatred for the man who had so deceived her daughter.

In the meantime, Rose Mary has gone to the underground altar-cell where the peryl stone is enthroned, and when she beholds the fateful stone she takes her father's sword and cleaves it in two. The evil spirits depart from it and almost simultaneously, Rose Mary falls to the floor, dead.

The supernatural element in this ballad is more pagan than that in Sister Helen and has more of an oriental tone. The use of magic as it is found in Rose Mary is given in a short history of the magic art of crystallomancy, by Lafcadio Hearn:

Crystallomancy is the art of seeing the future in crystals, or glass, or transparent substances of jewels. The same art can be practised with ink, held in the hand, offering to the eye the same reflecting surface that a black jewel would do. In Egypt, Arabia, Persia, and India, divination is still practised with ink

In the Middle Ages, when the whole process was absolutely mysterious, it was thought to be the work of spirits inside the stone, or crystal, or ink-drop

It has always been thought that the "subject"--that is, the boy or girl who looks into the stone, crystal, or ink-drop--must be absolutely innocent. The "subject" must be virtuous. In the Catholic Middle Ages the same idea took form especially in relation to the chastity of the "subject". . . .

A maiden--and the word was then used for both sexes, as it is sometimes used by Tennyson in his Idylls--could see ghosts or spirits, and could be made use of for purposes of crystallo-mancy even by a very wicked person. 39

The tragedy of Rossetti's ballad turns upon the fact that Rose Mary had secretly been guilty of a serious fault, and therefore could not read aright. The triumph of Rose Mary, that is, her putting the evil spirits to flight, is not allowed to relieve the sense of tragedy greatly, for Rose Mary must pay the penalty, death. There has been some interest among critics as to the origin of the term beryl-stone. There seems to have been no particular reason why the stone should have been called the beryl, except, as some persons have hinted, that Rossetti liked the sound of it. Treffrey Dunn tells of an incident which, in his opinion, caused Rossetti to use this particular stone. He, Dunn, had visited a lady who possessed a dreaming stone. When he returned, he told Rossetti about it, referring to it as the magic beryl. Rossetti liked the sound of the word, and declared that there was a great seeming of

39. Hearn, Lafcadio, "Studies in Rossetti", Pre-Raphaelite and Other Poets, pp. 83-85

mysticism in its sound. "Moreover, it is one of the mystic stones named in Revelations." 40

He substituted "Beryl" for "crystal" and built up his poem around it. Like all true poets, Rossetti shows himself to have been ever alive to whatever might in any way help him in his work. The incident narrated by Dunn is an instance of his finding inspiration in very small and almost unnoticeable suggestions.

The Bride's Prelude, like Rose Mary, has the theme of betrayal. Aloyse, a young maiden, falls in love with a kinsman, Urscelyn, who betrays, and then deserts her. When her brothers learn of her shame, they are extremely angry, and are about to kill her when their father prevents them. Aloyse's child is born, but is taken away from her by her relatives. Later Urscelyn returns, and agrees to marry the girl. It is on the eve of their wedding that Aloyse tells her sister, Amelotte, her sad story. Rossetti puts into it all the tragic intensity that he possibly can. The mental anguish of Aloyse is described especially well in the following stanza:

40. Dunn, H.T., Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle, p. 65.

'Sleeping, I wept; though until dark
 A fever dried mine eyes
 Kept open; save when a tear might
 Be forced from the mere ache of sight.
 And I nursed hatred day and night.' 41

The feeling of hatred expressed reminds one of Sister Helen; however, Aloyse hates without seeking revenge, so the two stories have but little in common.

Stratton Water is quite different from the other ballads just described. In it the lovers have been separated, the young man having been told by his mother and his brother that the young lady was dead, and she in turn having been told that he was false to her. The reunion of the lovers comes about in a very unusual manner. Lord Sands, the lover, sees on the river bank a white object. When he goes to see what it is he finds that it is the girl, Janet, from whom he has been separated through the lies of his relatives. She has come to the river to drown herself, for she is about to become a mother, and prefers death to disgrace. The water of the river is very high, owing to heavy floods, but Lord Sands carries Janet through the water along the side of the river, then swims out to a boat which

is floating on the river, and after he has secured it, puts Janet into it and rows her to the church. The couple marries, and the poem ends happily.

The theme of Stratton Water is handled in the manner of the old popular ballad, but it is less characteristic of Rossetti than many of his other ballads. To have the poem end happily is not like Rossetti as we generally find him in his ballad poetry. The theme is very slight, and there is no element of the supernatural.

The Staff and Scrip has for theme a story taken from the Gesta Romanorum, and is of a pilgrim who undertakes to try to conquer Duke Luke, who has destroyed the lands of Queen Blanchelys. The pilgrim is, of course, in love with the queen. When he leaves for the fight, he gives her his staff and scrip, and she in turn gives him a sword, a banner, and a shield. He meets Duke Luke but is brought back to the queen, dead. To honor his memory, she hangs his staff and scrip over her bed. All during her life she grieves for him, and years after his death she dies, happy in the thought that she will be reunited with him in heaven.

There is a touch of Christianity in this ballad, which marks it as different from Rose Mary and several of the others. The story is well worked out, but is not as valuable as a narrative as it is for the atmosphere of medievalism, especially of that period of knighthood of which Rossetti seemed so fond.

The theme of The Blessed Damozel was supposedly suggested to Rossetti by Edgar Allan Poe's Raven. Instead, however, of having a lover sighing for another, on earth, Rossetti reversed the situation and gave the story of the one who had passed on to heaven. The Blessed Damozel is leaning on one of the golden bars of heaven and is thinking of, and longing for, the time when her lover will join her. She plans all that they will do when he arrives, but suddenly there comes the realization that the time may be long before he arrives there, and she weeps.

This slight narrative may hardly seem to be of sufficient significance to warrant calling The Blessed Damozel a ballad, but although the poem is more purely a lyric than is any other of those which are considered in this thesis, still in spite of the slightness of the story, the poem fits into

the definition as stated earlier. Certainly the theme is not like any other that Rossetti has used in his ballads.

Troy Town is another ballad with a very slight narrative interest. It concerns Helen of Troy, who is pictured praying at Venus' shrine. Venus is pleased with Helen, and smiles at her. Cupid sends an arrow from his string which pierces the heart of Paris. The poem ends in an expression of the results of the work of Cupid:

Paris turned upon his bed,
 (O Troy Town!)
 Turned upon his bed and said,
 Dead at heart with the heart's desire---
 'Oh to clasp her golden head!'
 (O Troy's down,
 Tall Troy's on fire!) 42

Here again we have the suggestion of paganism which has been noticed in other ballads.

Eden Bower has for its subject the story of Lilith. Where Rossetti found the legend of Lilith can not be exactly determined. No doubt he had read a story of her in some of the medieval collections of stories which he so greatly enjoyed. The Jewish Encyclopoedia furnishes slight information concerning the legends of this strange creature. She was a female demon of the night and appeared in

human shape with wings. She was in the habit of stealing children, and it was believed that if a child smiled during the night of the Sabbath or of the new moon, Lilith was playing with it. The conception that she was the first wife of Adam seems to have been widely spread among the people of the Middle Ages.

It is this latter idea that forms the main theme of Eden Bower. According to Rossetti's interpretation Lilith had once been a snake, but had been turned into a woman after the creation of Adam. Before she had been loved by Adam, she had been the mate of Satan, who also had the form of a serpent. When she sees Adam happy with Eve, she becomes enraged and in a fit of jealousy appeals to her first mate, Satan, to help her obtain revenge on Adam. She begs him to let her assume his serpent form so that she may bring about the unhappiness of the now happy ones of Paradise. She gloats over the thought of all the misery she will bring into their lives, and like Sister Helen, she is bold and heartless in planning her terrible revenge. There is horror in the theme of Eden Bower, and one cannot understand the choice of such a subject as this demon unless he realizes that Rossetti was actually interested in such horrible

things as spectres, demons, and the like.

When we turn from the ballads in which some phase of love is the theme, we turn to two of Rossetti's most simple, and in some ways, his most fascinating ballads. These are The White Ship and The King's Tragedy, which deal with historical subjects.

The first of these two poems tells the story of King Henry I, who, with his son and a large number of followers, was returning from Normandy whither he had gone to claim the allegiance of the Normans. The Prince and Princess were on board the White Ship which was under the command of Fitz-Stephen, the royal pilot, and, surrounded by a goodly number of courtiers, were having a festive time when suddenly the ship struck a rock. The Prince was among a group of persons who had climbed into a boat and were rapidly rowing away from the scene of terror. He heard his sister scream, and learning that she was on the sinking ship, he demanded that an attempt be made to rescue her. The little boat was brought nearer the ship, but so many persons tried to jump from the ship into it, that it sank, and all were lost. The sole survivor of the disaster was the butcher of Rouen, by whom the tale is told.

The King, who had been in another ship, did not know of the fate of the lost vessel and was impatiently awaiting the arrival of his son and daughter. The news was finally revealed to him through a small boy who was sent by the courtiers into the King's presence. When the child had delivered his message, the King fell down in a swoon, and although he was revived, he "never smiled again." 43

The story is far from any of the love ballads, and in many ways is more effective. It is based on an actual occurrence and gives no chance for much exaggeration or elaboration.

The King's Tragedy, like The White Ship, shows Rossetti's ability to handle a historical subject. In it he tells the story of the murder of James I of Scotland by conspirators in the Black Friars' monastery at Perth. He displays the heroism of Catherine Douglas, who, in order to keep the murderers from the room where the King is hiding, thrusts her arm through the staples of the door, thus using it as a bolt. Her arm is broken and the king discovered. There is in this ballad an element of the supernatural which reminds us

of the earlier ballads of Rossetti. A strange-looking old woman seeks to warn the king of the tragedy which is about to come his way. She is a spirit, as is shown by the description of her:

But it seemed as though by a fire within
Her writhen limbs were wrung;
And as soon as the King was close to her,
She stood up gaunt and strong. 44

She warns the king of his approaching death, in a very weird manner, but the king believes her to be an evil spirit who wishes to influence him to oppose God's will; so he does not heed her warning. She appears to him again just before the murderers arrive, but she has come too late, and her warning can do nothing to save the king.

This ballad is in the true Rossetti manner, as far as the treatment of the supernatural element is concerned, and it is also characteristic in that it has an element of love. After the king's death, the queen will not allow the funeral to take place until all of the murderers have been found and killed. Here, too, is the old idea of revenge. It is not the chief motif in this poem

and there seems to be a little more justification for the queen's attitude than there is for the attitude of Sister Helen or of Lilith. In the queen there is not the jealousy that there is in the other two. She is grief-stricken, and in her grief she seeks comfort in punishing those who have caused her trouble.

This hasty glance at Rossetti's ballad themes shows that they are in many ways alike. The characters are usually of high rank, the stories are generally of tragic significance, the love element plays an important part, and the poet's liking for the supernatural and of the medieval is suggested.

Chapter IV.

THE DICTION USED IN ROSSETTI'S
BALLAD POETRY

Mr. Hall Caine tells us that Rossetti "knew no reproach of poetry more damning than to say it was written in proseman's diction";⁴⁵ and we can readily see, after a careful study of the words and phrases of his ballad poetry, that he was extremely careful to avoid any weakness in carrying out his principles. He consciously strove at all times to use the dignified language which he believed to be the proper medium for poetic expression. Even in his imitations of the simple diction of the old ballads, he attempted to hold to his principle, and to choose just the right words. On one occasion he wrote to a friend, "I

45. Benson, A.C., Rossetti, p. 81

have been reading all manner of old romaunts, to pitch upon stunning words for poetry.' 46 How successful he was, we shall see.

One of the most noticeable characteristics of Rossetti's use of words is his early tendency to choose those that are suggestive of the medieval in form and usage. Many of these are very rare, and even archaic, and generally they are pictorial and perfectly suggestive of the effect which the poet wishes to produce. Rose Mary has an abundance of such expressions. Some that are the most unusual in form are "wist," "clomb," "accurst," "trow," "alway," "goodliest," "eyne," and "writ." Together with references to a "bannerole", "spurs," "merlins," "ingle-bench," "surcoat," and other medieval properties, these words take us back to that period of which Rossetti was so fond. Indeed the poet had not wasted his time when he read the old tales dealing with the knights of the Middle Ages. He often gives us truly medieval pictures, and it is his use of expressions with which he must have been very familiar, and his recollection of the

46. Megroz, R.L., Dante Gabriel Rossetti, p. 218.

garments worn by the knights and ladies that make these pictures so real to us who are relatively unacquainted with the old stories. Note, for example, the details of the following description:

The belt was silver, and the clasp
 Of lozenged arm-bearings;
 A world of mirrored tints minute
 The rippling sunshine wrought into't,
 That flushed her hand and warmed her foot.

Over her bosom that lay still,
 The vest was rich in grain,
 With close pearls wholly overset:
 Around her throat the fastenings met
 Of chevesayle and mantelet. 47

Not only the student of medieval literature, but also the artist is here revealed.

Rossetti is a master in the use of effective similes, also. His ballads contain numerous examples of the poet's true artistry in making such selections as the following:

Her hair that lay along her back
 Was yellow like ripe corn.

And the souls mounting up to God
 Went by her like thin flames.

From the fixed place of Heaven she saw
 Time like a pulse shake fierce
 Through all the worlds.

And see our old prayers, granted, melt
Each like a little cloud.⁴⁸

It is remarkable that Rossetti, who was only nineteen years of age when he wrote The Blessed Damsel, should have been so successful in the use of the simile. He does not lose his power as he grows older, and The King's Tragedy, which was written when the poet's mental powers were declining, contains extremely effective examples of his ability:

In her bowers beneath a lady stood
A light of life to his sorrowful mood,
Like a lily amid the rain.

. . .

Like fire in snow the moonlight blazed
Amid the champing foam.

. . .

The branches smote like summoning hands

49

Some critics feel that Rossetti's similes are unnatural and strained, but for the most part it is agreed that they are effective.

Throughout Rossetti's ballads there is a great number of compounded words. In Rose Mary the

48. Poetical Works, pp. 1--5

49. Ibid., pp. 75-85

use of these words is particularly noticeable. The suggestion has been made by some of the critics that these show the influence of Keats, who was for a long time one of Rossetti's favorite poets. However that may be, it is an easy matter to find such compounds as "dark-waved," "storm-eddying," "close-shut," "heart-riven," "dire-gifted," "rainbow-hued," "bare-ridged," and the like. Often there seems to be no particular reason for compounding the words, but on the other hand, it sometimes is an advantage both to produce more even rhythm and to add to the descriptive effect.

Much of the beauty of diction in Rossetti's ballads depends not upon single words, similes, or compounds, but rather upon the felicitous combination of words. Sometimes the descriptive quality achieves the desired effect; again the suggestiveness of certain sounds or of the particular arrangement of the words produces it, but whatever may be the cause, there is a definite, often unforgettable, impression made. What, for example, could be more effective than

'See, see, the sunken pile of wood,
 Sister Helen,
 Shines through the thinned wax red as blood!" 50

Possibly the realization that the revenge which is to be obtained is to result in a death makes this especially significant, but there is likewise a beauty in the diction used to describe the picture that makes it artistic. Further instances of the same kind of thing are found in other stanzas of Sister Helen:

'Here high up in the balcony,
 Sister Helen,
 The moon flies face to face with me.'

Again, the little brother says:

'In the shaken trees the chill stars shake.' 51

Here as elsewhere in Rossetti's poetry there is simple diction and great condensation. In these two qualities lies great strength as is shown especially in the description of a tragic scene. In The Staff and Scrip one finds a splendid example of this in the description of the bringing of the pilgrim's dead body to the queen:

50. Poetical Works, p. 135

51. Poetical Works, p. 136

'Uncover ye his face,' she said.
 'O changed in little space!'
 She cried, 'O pale that was so red!
 O God, O God of Grace! 52
 Cover his face.'

This language is thoroughly convincing and forceful.

Being a Pre-Raphaelite, however, and fond of a certain amount of ornament, Rossetti often adopted a more elaborate kind of diction which also has not a little charm. One of the best examples of this is noticed in the description of the beryl-stone in Rose Mary:

With shuddering light 'twas stirred and strewn
 Like the cloud-nest of the wading moon;
 Freaked it was like the bubble's ball,
 Rainbow-hued through a misty pall
 Like the middle light of the waterfall.

Shadows dwelt in its teeming girth
 Of the known and unknown things of earth;
 The cloud above and the wave around,-
 The central fire at the sphere's heart bound
 Like doomsday prisoned underground. 53

It is probably just such descriptions as this which prompt some of the critics to say, as J.C. Shairp does:

The ballad is an excellent example of the elaborately wrought and highly ornamented kind . . . Each feeling Rose Mary has, each situation, is over-described; and the pathos of the whole is smothered beneath a cloud of imagery. 54

52. Poetical Works, p. 54

53. Ibid, p. 5

54. Shairp, J.C., "Aesthetic Poetry," Living Age, CLIV (July, 1882), p. 234.

Considering the oriental nature of the poem as a whole, however, one is not necessarily as greatly displeased with the amount of ornamentation as Shairp is. The abundance of detail is necessary to present to us the richness of the oriental setting. On the other hand, for ballad poetry the simple diction generally used in these poems is more pleasing than the more ornamental and it brings the author closer to the old popular ballad which he often imitates extremely well.

A more minute study of Rossetti's diction would prove interesting to the student of linguistics, but for the purposes of this thesis, it is neither fitting nor profitable to go more deeply into the subject. This rapid review will serve to show that whether his diction was simple or somewhat elaborate, Rossetti was quite successful in performing the task he set for himself, of pitching "upon stunning words for poetry."

Chapter V.

VERSIFICATION: THE USE OF BALLAD DEVICES.

I.

The study of Rossetti's use of mechanical devices in his ballad poetry is interesting. In considering his verse forms, one discovers that he was not guided by what is generally called the conventional stanza of the popular ballad, and that although he did use this form in two of his directly imitative poems, The King's Tragedy and Stratton Water, he usually preferred variations of it, or produced innovations. On the other hand, in his use of the refrain, dialogue, and repetition, he makes an appreciative use of these devices of the popular ballads.

In Stratton Water one sees Rossetti employing quite effectively the old ballad measure and form, which have been described earlier in this study:

Out from the castle-stair Lord Sands
 Looked up the western lea;
 The rook was grieving on her nest,
 The flood was round the tree. 55

He does not always achieve such smoothness as this in his lines, however, and there are many that are decidedly uneven, like the following:

He's ta'en her by the short girdle
 And by the dripping sleeve:
 'Go fetch Sir Jock my mother's priest,--
 You'll ask of him no leave.' 56

Like the old balladists Rossetti sometimes introduces stanzas of different lengths and of different rhyme schemes. There are only three of these in Stratton Water, but in the longer poem, The King's Tragedy, one finds many. There is the six line form like the following:

'Twas then the moon sailed clear of the rack
 On high in her hollow dome;
 And still as aloft with hoary crest
 Each clamorous wave rang home
 Like fire in snow the moonlight blazed
 Amid the champing foam. 57

This kind of stanza was frequently used by the old ballad composers. Not so often do we see in their

55. Poetical Works, p. 149

56. Ibid., p. 154

57. Ibid., p. 81.

poems the five line stanza that Rossetti uses occasionally:

At last he said:—"God's ways are His own;
 Man is but shadow and dust.
 Last night I prayed by His altar-stone;
 Tonight I wend to the Feast of His Son;
 And in Him I set my trust." 58

These different stanzas give variety to this particular ballad, so long that it might easily grow monotonous otherwise—but they are not always technically as correct as they might be. To add to the realism of the story, Rossetti also included parts of King James' own poem, The King's Quhair. He found it necessary, however, to cut the ten-syllabled lines of the original work down to eight syllabled couplets to suit the metre of the poem:

The fairest and the freshest flower
 That ever I saw before that hour,
 The which o' the sudden made to start
 The blood of my body to my heart.

. . .

Ah sweet, are ye a worldly creature
 Or heavenly thing in form of nature? 59

The effect of such stanzas is not so pleasing as Rossetti may have thought it would be. There is variety, indeed, but there is also a delay caused

58. Poetical Works, p. 83

59. Ibid, p. 89

in the narrative by these additions--a delay which is scarcely justifiable.

The King's Tragedy does not offer as much opportunity for the study of Rossetti's inventiveness in the matter of form as do his other ballad poems. In Rose Mary and The Bride's Prelude are some of the most curious examples of this. In the first named, the poet uses in the main part of the ballad a five line stanza which is composed of a couplet followed by a rhyming triplet:

Paler yet were the pale cheeks grown
As the gray eyes sought the Beryl-stone;
Then over her mother's lap leaned she,
And stretched her thrilled throat passionately,
And sighed from her soul, and said, "I see."
60

This form sometimes gives the poem a musical effect because of the three last lines with their somewhat sing-song rhyme. The Bride's Prelude is written in a more curious scheme even than Rose Mary, although it also has the five line stanza; the first two lines do not have a corresponding rhyme, but there is again the use of the triplets with the same rhyme as in the latter poem;

Most weak she was; for as she pressed
 Her hand against her throat,
 Along the arras she let trail
 Her face, as if all heart did fail.
 And sat with shut eyes, dumb and pale. 61

The prosaic effect of the unrhymed first lines is in parts of the ballad very noticeable, and somewhat objectionable. Were it not for the poetic language which Rossetti uses in the piece, the defects of the verse form would be more apparent.

Another peculiar variation of the five line stanza is found in The Staff and Scrip. In the first four lines the ballad metre is used, and then follows a line of four syllables. The lines rhyme ababb, as can be seen in the following:

They shook far off with palace sport
 When joust and dance were rife;
 And the hunt shook them from the court
 For hers, in peace or strife,
 Was a Queen's life. 62

There is a sense of abruptness in the last line, and in places one feels that Rossetti may have found some difficulty in thinking of a suitable line to complete the stanza.

The verse forms of the other five ballad poems are all different from the ones just described: the six line stanza which is used in The

61. Poetical Works, p. 192

62. Ibid., p. 56

Blessed Damozel employs with a fair degree of regularity the ballad metre; a rhyming couplet which sometimes lengthens into a triplet is found in The White Ship; a variation of the triplet is relieved by the refrain of Sister Helen; three lines, two of which form a rhyming couplet are used in Eden Bower; and a peculiar quatrain, rhyming aaba, is the form of stanza in Troy Town.

Rossetti is often careless about the number of syllables in his lines, as has been noticed. Besides this, he has many defective rhymes. For example, he rhymes "stem" and "same," "supreme," and "him," and others that are even more unpleasant to the ear. He likewise often places a strong syllable in rhyme with a weak one, as in these lines from Rose Mary:

Slowly fades the sun from the wall
Till day lies dead on the sun-dial. 63

A.C.Benson accounts for this by saying:

These rhymes were used partly deliberately to give a pleasing contrast; but partly, I think, Rossetti's ear gave weak endings a certain emphasis which a purebred Englishman would hardly affix to them. 64

Probably most persons will scarcely agree with Mr.

63. Poetical Works, p. 37

64. Rossetti, p. 93

Benson that the contrast is a pleasant one; rather, they will be likely to feel annoyed at the unmusical effect produced.

II.

That Rossetti was well acquainted with the old ballad devices such as the refrain, dialogue, and incremental repetition, becomes very apparent to the student who makes a careful analysis of his ballad poems. There is seen not only his skill in handling the devices, but also his wise judgment in the sparing use of them. He furnishes sufficient variety to keep the reader interested, often by the unusual manner in which he employs the devices, and at other times by having two of them in the same ballad.

The ballads which show the use of the refrain are Sister Helen, The White Ship, Troy Town, and Eden Bower. The first named poem, more than any other, shows the author's ability to use this device to add to the weird charm of the ballad. Of itself, the refrain is peculiar in its power:

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Three days to-day, between Hell and Heaven!) 65

This, at the end of the first stanza, tells us at once of the thought that flashes through the mind of Sister Helen, and we are from the beginning interested in the persistence of similar thoughts. While she is absorbed in her terrible work of seeking revenge, there is always a realization of what she is doing. As the revenge idea grows in intensity, so does the thought become more and more annoying. When the little brother remarks that the waxen image as he drops away looks like dead folk, the refrain is:

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
What of the dead between Hell and Heaven?)⁶⁶

So, with a slight variation in the first words of the second line, the refrain increases in power, until at the end it reaches great dramatic force, and draws the curtain, so to speak, on the terrible tragedy of the poem:

'Ah what white thing at the door has cross'd,
Sister Helen?
Ah what is this that sighs in the frost?'
'A soul that's lost as mine is lost,
Little Brother!'

(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Lost, lost, all lost, between Hell and Heaven!)

67

66. Poetical Works, p. 135

67. Ibid., p. 148.

There is pathos in these lines. Sister Helen loses now her witch character, and with a despairing thought realizes to the fullest extent what she has done, that there is absolutely no chance for her to recover all that she has hazarded in her desire to obtain revenge. It is peculiar that Rossetti has Helen think of the Virgin Mary, but it adds to the effectiveness of the poem for this witchlike girl to be inspired with Christian thoughts. During the Middle Ages, according to Lafcadio Hearn, the Virgin Mary was considered a refuge for the despairing witch or magician. "We could not expect one practicing witchcraft to call upon the name of Christ. But the same person, in moments of intense pain, might naturally ejaculate the name of Mary." 68 It is interesting to see that Sister Helen's hate is so all absorbing that her thoughts of the Virgin cannot change her in her determination to bring ruin upon others, as well as upon herself.

In The White Ship one sees Rossetti's sparing use of the refrain in all its effectiveness. There is really a repeated stanza which consists of a double refrain, but it occurs only three times; at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the poem:

By none but me can the tale be told,
 The butcher of Rouen, poor Berold.
 (Lands are swayed by a King on a throne.)
 'Twas a royal train put forth to sea,
 Yet the tale can be told by none but me.
 (The sea hath no King but God alone.) 69

Each time the stanza is repeated it adds power to the dramatic intensity of the ballad. When the story has finally been narrated and the realization of the king's great sorrow and his inability to stay it have been expressed by the line, "But the King never smiled again," the refrain has a new and even greater significance than before.

The refrains used in Troy Town and Eden Bower are of far less value than those in Sister Helen and The White Ship, but they show a certain relation to the general mood of each poem. In Troy Town, for example, the constant recurrence of

(O Troy's down,
 Tall Troy's on fire!) 70

is, according to William Sharp, "in thorough harmony with the motif, prophetic as it is of the terrible outcome of the love of 'heaven-born Helen, Sparta's queen' for the wily son of Priam." 71

69. Poetical Works, p. 53

70. Ibid, p. 16.

71. Sharp, Wm., Dante Gabriel Rossetti, p. 362.

The refrain of this ballad is of added power if read aloud. The slightly alliterative quality of it is more noticeable then, and the combination of sounds is better appreciated.

In Eden Bower the refrain seems less meaningful than that of any of the other ballads. It has an unusual construction, as may be observed:

It was Lilith the wife of Adam.
 (Eden bower's in flower.)
 Not a drop of her blood was human,
 But she was made like a soft sweet woman.

Lilith stood on the skirts of Eden;
 (And O the bower and the hour!)
 She was the first that thence was driven;
 With her was hell and with Eve was heaven.

72

The refrain varies alternately, as in these stanzas, throughout the poem. It produces a sort of chanting effect, but otherwise it seems to have no use. Rossetti was wise in not putting both lines together in each stanza.

Sister Helen is by far the most dramatic of Rossetti's ballads, and probably the chief reason

for this is the remarkable use of dialogue in it. The whole poem is really a representation that might well belong to the stage. From the very first stanza the reader is aware of the situation; Sister Helen is introduced by the question concerning what she is doing:

'Why do you melt your waxen man,
Sister Helen?

and the time scheme is revealed in the next line,

'To-day is the third since you began.'

The person to whom Helen speaks is introduced when the latter answers,

'The time was long, yet the time ran,
Little brother.' 73

Without a word of explanation from the poet the drama is presented to the reader, and continues in the same fashion throughout the whole sketch. The little brother does not always ask questions, but often makes reflections to which his sister always has something to add. The fact that this innocent

little child is carrying on a conversation with such a wicked witch-woman gives strength to the dialogue as well as to the whole ballad. There is something so natural in what the boy says that one feels his reality. He is, like many children, dissatisfied with the weary work which his sister has given him; that is, to look out the window and report to her what he sees. He grows petulant:

'But if you have done your work aright,
Sister Helen,
You'll let me play, for you said I might.'

74

Almost immediately he forgets that he wants to play, though, and again becomes absorbed in watching the melting image. All through the ballad the dialogue pictures for the reader the characters, the situation, the mental attitudes--everything that one might find depicted in a good drama. With it there is always beauty of word and phrase, rhythm, and all that makes for true poetry.

What may be considered as a variation of the dialogue is the method that is used in The Staff and Scrip. Conversation, interspersed with explanatory material, gives a dramatic tone almost equal to that produced by dialogue pure and simple:

'Who rules these lands?' the Pilgrim said.
 'Stranger, Queen Blanchelys.'
 'And who has thus harried them?' he said.
 'It was Duke Luke did this:
 God's ban be his!' 75

The directness of these lines, which are the first ones of the poem, bears comparison with that of the first stanza of Sister Helen. As in the latter ballad, these lines plunge the reader immediately into the story. No words are wasted, and one can immediately grasp the significance of the whole situation. In The Staff and Scrip, however, conversation does not furnish the amount of characterization, of description, and the like, that the dialogue of Sister Helen does. On the contrary, Rossetti depends largely for the explanatory and descriptive passages to do that work. It is, indeed, less effective than the other method, but withal, a well used one. Stratton Water, The Bride's Prelude, Rose Mary, The King's Tragedy, Troy Town, and Eden Bower also use the conversational device to a limited extent, but hardly is it as effectively employed as it is in The Staff and Scrip. In most of these ballads, the conversational material is of

secondary importance. In Stratton Water, however, one observes some examples of the kind of dialogue used in Sister Helen:

'But I have never a sail so white,
 And the water's not yet there.'
 'O it's the swans o' your bonny lake
 The rising flood doth scare.' 76

The use differs in this poem in that there are many stanzas of explanation along with these others.

Incremental repetition is not used extensively by Rossetti, but one finds an excellent example of it in Troy Town. It occurs in the third line of each stanza, and is used as the following examples show:

The sun and moon of the heart's desire
 A little gift for a hearts desire.
 Shaped it is to the heart's desire,

Because of its place in the ballad, one scarcely notices it at a first reading, but it runs through the entire poem, ending in the last stanza with:

Dead at heart with the heart's desire.⁷⁷

In Rose Mary one sees both a brief use of

76. Poetical Works, p. 150

77. Ibid., p. 20

dialogue and of incremental repetition. The first four stanzas of part two are tremendously dramatic, because of these departures from the original method of the poem. The mother of Rose Mary has just discovered her daughter's lack of purity, and she asks:

Pale Rose Mary, what shall be done
With a rose that Mary weeps upon?

Her daughter answers:

Mother, let it fall from the tree,
And never walk where the strewn leaves be
Till winds have passed and the path is free.

The next time, the question is:

Sad Rose Mary, what shall be done
With a cankered flower beneath the sun?

The repetition is increasing the dramatic emotion of the scene, and when the third question comes:

Lost Rose Mary, what shall be done
With a heart that is but a broken one?

Rose Mary in agony answers pathetically:

Mother, let it lie where it must;
The blood was drained with the bitter thrust,
And dust is all that sinks in the dust. 78

There is an emotional climax in these few stanzas which gives to the whole poem a large part of its

pathos and dramatic appeal. In the Beryl-Song which precedes the second and third parts of the ballad and which is introduced again at the end of it, one observes a repetition that may have been suggested by that in ballad poetry although the song itself is a lyric. At the beginning of the first song are the lines:

We whose home is the Beryl,
Fire-spirits of dread desire

and at the end of it, comes a reversed repetition of the same idea:

Fire-spirits of dread desire,
We whose home is the Beryl. 79

Each of the three songs has a similar opening and closing verse.

Although Rossetti did not feel bound to observe the use of the old ballad devices, such as refrain, repetition and dialogue, yet on the whole, he shows greater dependence upon them than he does upon the conventional verse forms. One can easily see that he had read from the old collections, such stanzas as the following:

Quhy dois zour brand sae drop wi' bluid,
Edward, Edward?
Quhy dois zour brand sae drop wi' bluid?
And quhy sae sad gang zee, O?

O, I hae killed my hauke sae guid,
Mither, Mither:
O, I hae killed my hauke sae guid:
And I had nae mair bot hee, O. 80

The repetition of the mother's questions is very similar to that used by Rose Mary's mother, and like the latter, she finally gets her son to admit that he has been guilty of a crime. When Rossetti read the old ballads, it is very likely that the refrains, the dialogue, and the repetitions made a more lasting impression upon him than did the use of certain poetic forms.

Chapter VI.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ROSSETTI'S WORK ESPECIALLY AS SHOWN IN HIS BALLAD POETRY.

This analysis of the ballad poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti has shown some of his outstanding characteristics as a writer, but there remain several others which have been either only hinted at or not been mentioned at all in this study. A brief discussion of these will prove helpful for a better understanding and appreciation of even the ballad poetry.

Perhaps no other feature of his poetry has been more widely criticised than that which is usually referred to as sensuousness, fleshliness, earthiness, or sensualism. One of the most harsh attacks ever made on the work of Rossetti was made on this feature by Robert Buchanan, a contemporary, in an article entitled "The Fleshly School of Poetry"

first published in The Contemporary Review for October, 1871, under the pseudonym, Thomas Maitland. Among many other cutting statements, Buchanan says:

The fleshly gentlemen have bound themselves by solemn league and covenant to extol fleshliness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial art; to aver that poetic expression is greater than poetic thought, and by inference that the body is greater than the soul, and sound superior to sense; and that the poet, properly to develop his poetic faculty, must be an intellectual hermaphrodite, to whom the very facts of day and night are lost in a whirl of aesthetic terminology. 81

He becomes more personal than this, though, and speaks of Rossetti thus:

Whether he is writing of the holy Damozel, or of the Virgin herself, or of Lilith, or Helen, or of Dante, or of Jenny the street-walker, he is fleshly all over, from the roots of his hair, to the tip of his toes; never a true lover merging his identity into that of the beloved one; never spiritual, never tender; always self-conscious and aesthetic. 89

There is undoubtedly some ground for accusing the poet of being "fleshly", and at the time when Buchanan made his attack more than at present, there was a certain repugnance felt for what tended toward the morally unpleasant; however, as in most

81. Buchanan, Robert, "The Fleshly School of Poetry," Notorious Literary Attacks, by A. Mordell, pp.

82. Ibid., p. 201.

criticisms of this type, there was much that was unjust and unwarranted in the article. That Buchanan himself realized this, is evidenced by a recantation which he made in The Academy for July 1, 1881.

Whether this retraction was made because of the objections which Rossetti and his friends had offered to his first article, or because Buchanan was really convinced of his own unfairness, it is difficult to say. At any rate, the statement, "Mr. Rossetti, I freely admit now, never was a Fleshly Poet at all," 83 came much too late to afford the poet, who was sick at that time in mind and body, any gratification. The criticism had wounded at its first publication so severely that Rossetti could not forget the pain of it.

Buchanan was not the only critic to accuse the poet of being, as it is generally termed, too sensuous, and, as has been mentioned before, there is much reason for these accusations. In the ballad poetry less of this is found than in the sonnet sequence, The House of Life, but in two of the ballads, Troy Town and Eden Bower, the sensuous element mounts almost to pure animalism. There is in these poems, a delight in physical beauty that repels the ordinary reader, even though he be less

83. The Letters of D.G. Rossetti to His Publisher, edited by his O. Doughty, p. xl.

squeamish about such matters than the Victorians were. No author deserves to be condemned on account of a few poems in which his art is misused, however, and Rossetti might well be defended in the words of A.C.Benson, who takes a fairly sane view of the matter:

The whole tone and spirit of Rossetti's poems are misrepresented. It is true that there breaks out in places a certain voluptuousness of phrase and image, but the fault is rather one of taste, in speaking without disguise of things more wisely left to men's memories and hearts, but not in themselves either unnatural or debasing; of recounting things which, as Horace says, are sacro digna silentio. 84

This "recounting" has special reference to The House of Life, probably, for in that group of sonnets Rossetti attempts to give a history of his own love experiences in a manner rather in keeping with his Italian heritage than with his English training. There was no intention, and probably no realization, generally, of immorality, and although certain passages from the poems might be cited as indicative of this failing, yet, as Benson wisely remarks, "by carefully selected quotations it would be as easy or easier to prove

both Shakespeare and Milton to be vile and shameless poets, undermining the foundations of morality." 85

Rossetti's mysticism is not a dominant characteristic of his ballad poetry, but there are, nevertheless, quite marked examples of it there. It may be well, first, to show the way in which the term "mysticism" has been applied to this poet, for the term has various applications, and in regard to some of the usages of the word, he was far from being included in the group of mystics. He had probably little or no real faith in religion as it is practiced by most Christians, and although he seems to have been able to understand the religious feelings of other persons, he never seems to have experienced them himself. In the religious significance of the word, mysticism, then, Rossetti may easily be ruled out. In another sense, however, the term may easily apply to him. One of the best explanations of his mysticism has been briefly stated in a review of William Sharp's biography of Rossetti, published in the Nation:

A mystic he primarily was, a man who cared less for the object or the thought than for its vague and often arbitrary suggestions; who used things not for their current value, but as coins stamped with his own image and

superscription; tendering them for the original and self-derived worth he gave to them. Necessarily he dealt much with symbols, the only refuge for a mystic who desires to indicate his meaning to others. If he wished to bring before the mind the Temptation of the Flesh, he painted a luxurious woman or he sang of Eden Bower, but in either case Lilith is more than she seems, she stands for something else. If in his work one sees or hears mention of a dove or an apple, one must ask, not what it is, but what it means, for he is almost certainly using a sign language. 86

With this definition of the term, it is not difficult to locate in the ballads some examples of the poet's mysticism: An outstanding stanza in The Staff and Scrip is this:

Right so, he knew that he saw weep
 Each night through every dream
 The Queen's own face, confused in sleep
 With visages supreme
 Not known to him. 87

The queen is not important here as a woman, but as an ideal, toward which the knight had all his life been working. This ideal had floated through his dreams and had impelled him on until now he stands face to face with this representation of it. He has before not realized what he sought, but when he beholds the queen he suddenly knows. There seems to have been some power which has

86. The Nation, XXXVI (May 10, 1883), p. 408
 87. Poetical Works, p. 49

brought him to her. The reference to the others whom he saw in his dreams is probably to angels. In The Blessed Damozel one finds a kind of spiritual mysticism in the stanza:

(Alas! We two, we two, thou say'st!
 Yea, one wast thou with me
 That once of old. But shall God lift
 To endless unity
 The soul whose likeness with thy soul
 Was but its love for thee?) 88

There is a deeper significance in these lines than there usually is in Rossetti's mysticism, and the line which suggests that after the lovers have been reunited in heaven they will dwell there in oneness with each other and with God might mislead some persons into believing that the poet who conceived such a thought was of a deeply religious nature. Rose Mary too is full of symbolism, but the mystical thought of the poem is so mingled with the occult that one is not certain as to the interpretation of all the symbols. Suffice it to say that there are many such symbols, which exemplify the mysticism of the author.

One of the greatest of Rossetti's powers as a ballad writer is his ability to

depict vividly tragic situations and great mental suffering. This ability has been hinted at in the chapter on diction and the one on technical devices, but it well deserves some elaboration, since it has so great a part in his popularity as a writer of ballad poetry.

One of the most effective of Rossetti's methods of depicting a tragic situation is by the creation of what may be termed atmosphere. In The Bride's Prelude, for instance, he impresses upon the reader the feeling of the most terrible heat. Such expressions as, "And the noonday stands still for heat," "And the hot window's dull perfume," and "The room lay still in dusty glare," are indeed forceful in giving the impression of being stifled by the oppressiveness. Aloyse, who is about to confess to her sister the terrible tragedy of her life, is so overcome by the emotions which arise in her heart that she is literally gasping for breath. Because the author has succeeded in making the reader feel the oppression of the heat, he also succeeds in conveying the inward feeling of breathlessness which Aloyse has. When the sad story is being related, then, the reader passes through the mental agony that the narrator is

suffering. The tragedy is therefore more intense in its effect, for both physical and mental pain have been endured.

Another means of describing a tragic situation effectively is by the placing of contrasting characters side by side. In Sister Helen, as has been mentioned, the innocent little boy is placed next to his witch-like sister: in The Bride's Prelude, too, Aloyse reveals her sad story to her sister, Amelotte, who is so pure that Aloyse herself felt the strong line of difference between them:

'That year the convent yielded thee
 Back to our home; and thou
 Then knew'st not how I shuddered cold
 To kiss thee, seeming to enfold
 To my changed heart myself of old.' 89

There is a "black and white" effect produced by putting such vicious characters against such virtuous ones, and perhaps Rossetti, painter that he was, realized the value of sharp contrasts in his poetry.

Often the brevity with which the poet presents a tragic scene adds intensity to it. Reference to this has been made in previous chapters,

89. Poetical Works, p. 233.

but another example may well be cited here. In The White Ship, after all have been lost but the butcher of Rouen, the tragedy of it is thus described:

And what were men and what was a ship
Were toys and splinters in the sea's grip.
90

The power of the poet's imagery is extremely strong here, and the picture of the scene is unforgettable.

Some of the devices used to portray tragic situations are likewise used to describe mental suffering. Of course the two things are so closely bound together that one would naturally expect the same methods to be employed. Rossetti seems to be even more capable and more unusual in the work of describing the mental states than in that of showing tragedy. In Rose Mary he is at his best when he describes the mental torture of the young girl:

The damsel clung to her mother's knee,
And dared not let the shriek go free;
Low she crouched by the lady's chair
And shrank blindfold in her fallen hair,
And whispering said, "The spears are there!"
91

After the mother has discovered her daughter's

90. Poetical Works, p. 62

91. Ibid., p. 10.

sin, another excellent description of mental agony is given, this time showing both the women's grief:

Closely locked, they clung without speech,
And the mirrored souls shook each to each,
As the cloud-moon and the water-moon
Shake face to face when the dim stars swoon
In stormy bowers of the night's mid-moon.

92

Quite different from these descriptions are those which are used to portray the passing of thoughts in the mind of the butcher of Rouen when he was in the sea after the wreck:

Blithe is the shout on Harfleur's strand
When morning lights the sails to land;

And blithe is Harfleur's echoing gloam
When mothers call the children home;

And high do the bells of Rouen beat
When the Body of Christ goes down the street.

These things and the like were heard and shown
In a moment's trance 'neath the sea alone;

93

Rossetti here shows well a queer trick of the mind when it operates in unusual situations.

Not much attention has been given directly to the influence of supernaturalism in Rossetti's ballads. There is scarcely one of his ballad poems

92. Poetical Works, p. 22.

93. Ibid., p. 62

which does not show it in some form, and it is the cominant note in most of them:

Rossetti's attitude towards the supernatural can be simply defined. . . . The supernatural was, so to speak, an article of his imaginative creed; the conception of it affected him profoundly, and he had an almost child-like relish for supernatural situations. The result was that he wrote of such things not shamefacedly or ingeniously, but simply, and with a kind of direct conviction, which is the essence of sincere art. 94

Rose Mary, more than any other of his ballads, shows how well the poet used the supernatural element, In the description of the mystery surrounding the beryl-stone one feels that he has been most successful in employing it:

Even as she spoke, they two were 'ware
Of music-notes that fell through the air;
A chiming shower of strage device,
Drop echoing drop, once, twice and thrice,
As rain may fall in Paradise. 95

The artistry of this stanza cannot be denied. One feels that the poet actually experienced this heavenly combination of musical sounds. Not always does Rossetti present a beautiful picture of the supernatural, however, as is shown in such pieces as Sister Helen and The King's Tragedy.

94. Benson, A.C., Rossetti, p. 104

95. Poetical Works, p. 7.

Helen's belief in witchcraft is fascinating, but terrible. It makes the reader shudder, while at the same time it is powerfully convincing. The witch in *The King's Tragedy*, with her "writhen limbs" and her eyes that held the king against his will, is also rather horrible than otherwise; and her strange warnings which are wailed out dolorously send a shudder through the reader's body.

Rossetti did not have the liking for Nature that is generally noticed in the writers of his age and of the age preceding him, but he uses natural description often more effectively than if he had been too enthusiastic as poets sometimes are. With an artist's eye, he observed the things of nature, and because he was calm in his observation and sparing in his use of what he saw, he achieved an effect that is especially useful to ballad poetry. Surely the poet who writes in The White Ship such lines as these, is not blind to nature:

As bright as the golden poppy is
That the beech breeds for the surf to kiss:

Yet pale his cheek as the thorn in Spring
And his garb black like the raven's wing. 96

The simplicity of the comparisons charms almost as much as do those oft quoted lines from Sister Helen, lines which more than any others in Rossetti's ballads show the exquisite use he could make of his observations of Nature:

'Here high up in the balcony,
Sister Helen,
The moon flies face to face with me.'

and

'Outside it's merry in the wind's wake,
Sister Helen,
In the shaken trees the chill stars shake.'

97

II.

Personal opinion plays such an enormous part in assigning any author to a particular place in literature that it is little wonder at the variety of judgments made of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's work as a poet. There are critics today, like Robert Buchanan, who see only the offensive, the "fleshly" side of his poetry, and are hesitant

about admitting him to the circle of the great literary men of even his own age. They read, apparently, only a few of the really objectionable sonnets from The House of Life, and will have no more to do with Rossetti. They do not seem to realize that he has written some of the best imitations of the old popular ballad and some of the most exquisite literary ballads of the nineteenth century. A summary view of the relative merit of these ballads may help to prove to these hesitating critics that there is much to admire of this great poet.

The ballad poem to which one may safely assign the first place among Rossetti's work is Sister Helen. No other single poem in any phase of his poetry can equal this excellent imitation of the popular ballad. I know of no other ballad in English literature that surpasses it, although I am willing to place on equal rank with it both Keats' La Belle Dame Sans Merci, and Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Critics in general assign a high place to Sister Helen, although not all of them are willing to assign it first rank. Many of Rossetti's contemporaries were aware of the power of the poem. John Ruskin, in a letter to the author, writes,

"Sister Helen is glorious," 98 and Thomas Bayne, in an article written in the year of Rossetti's death, remarks:

It is a story of revenge, unsurpassed in steadiness and directness of purpose, firm, unswerving grip of fell circumstance coercive of tragical destiny, and realistic presentation of heart-rending sighs and shadowy utterances from the borderlands of woe. 99

What may be the differences of opinion of the relative merit of the ballad, all of the critics are aware of its excellencies; its wonderfully dramatic intensity, its strong tragic significance, its use of natural, quick dialogue, and above all, its remarkable study of a soul gripped by fierce hatred.

Rose Mary, The Bride's Prelude, Stratton Water, and The White Ship are close to Sister Helen in worth. There is a very wide range of opinions as to their relative merits, but it is quite generally agreed that they rank very high, not only in Rossetti's work, but also in all ballad poetry of the century. What Shairp says of Rose Mary is

98. Ruskin; Rossetti; and Pre-Raphaelitism, p. 144

99. The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti; Living Age, CLII (March 31, 1882), p. 821.

characteristic of the general criticism offered for this great poem:

The ballad is an excellent example of the elaborately wrought and highly ornamented kind. It has many merits; but one it has not--simplicity and directness, which we take to be the chief characteristics of the real old ballad. Each feeling Rose Mary has, each situation, is over-described; and the pathos of the whole is smothered beneath a cloud of imagery. 100

In the light of this comment it is interesting to know that Rose Mary is one of the three poems that Rossetti himself has classified as a ballad. Shairp may be somewhat harsh in his comments, but one of the notable defects of the poem is that it is too long. That it is a work of art cannot be denied, however, and if the author has too many colors, too much ornamentation, it is that his pictorial art is too Pre-Raphaelite to be thoroughly appreciated by those persons who prefer greater attention to simplicity and to selection of details than the painters of Rossetti's school did.

Stratton Water and The White Ship have been about equally praised. As direct imitations of the popular ballads they are extremely successful, but as characteristic of the real Rossetti art

100. "Aesthetic Poetry", Living Age, CLIV (July 1882), p. 234.

they are far inferior to either Sister Helen or Rose Mary. Both of them show a fair amount of condensation, both make use of the old devices of the popular ballad, and both are dramatically intense and emotionally fine.

"The King's Tragedy," says Lafcadio Hearn, "is a little strained; perhaps the poet attempted too much." ¹⁰¹ This brief comment sums up very well the defect of this ballad. The interesting story loses in value because of an abundance of detail; there were too many facts to include in the space of a ballad, "and one misses the radiant and mysterious working of imagination which was the mark of the real Rossetti." ¹⁰² As usual, Benson strikes at the point with sureness.

The Staff and Scrip is, unlike The King's Tragedy, very characteristic of Rossetti in that it is a medieval story told in a few bold strokes, highly imaginative, and intensely emotional. There are exquisite bits of pictorial art in the descriptions of the banner and the shield which the queen gives to the knight, and splendid dramatic touches in many of the stanzas, but the poem seems to lack the force and appeal that the other ballads

101. "Studies in Rossetti," Pre-Raphaelite and other Poets, p. 73.

102. Rossetti, p. 108

have.

Troy Town and Eden Bower have some fine qualities, but because of their "earthiness" they are to a certain degree inferior to anything that Rossetti wrote, with the possible exception of several of the sonnets which he never published because he realized their sensualism. There seems no reason for their existence, and it is with some disgust that one reads them.

The Blessed Damozel ranks extremely high as a poem, but as a ballad it has but little merit. The beauty of imagery, the mystical atmosphere of the whole poem, the exquisitely drawn pictures are proofs of the remarkable art of Rossetti, and a study of his work is not complete without a view of this piece, but among ballad poems one admits it to classification with apologies. It is indeed a perfect poem, but not a perfect ballad.

Although Rossetti's fame rests largely upon his sonnet sequence, The House of Life, one can see from this study of his ballad poetry that this is a part of his work which ought not to be underestimated. He might easily have been a very

great poet if he had confined himself to this type, if he had never written his sonnets. Ever the conscious artist, ever the able story-teller, ever the delver into the mysteries of the supernatural and of medieval life and thought, with an eye to all that is unusual, Rossetti was right when he declared of ballad poetry, "There lies your line." He has followed his "line" carefully, successfully; and it may be hoped that in the not far distant future, his ballad poetry will receive the notice that it truly deserves, and that some day Dante Gabriel Rossetti will have a higher place in literature than he is often granted now.

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